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Browsing in the Western Stacks

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Accessibility

Browsing in the Western Stacks

Richard F. Thomas

One of the powerful functions of a library—*any* library—lies in its ability to take us away from worlds that are familiar and comfortable and into ones which we can neither predict nor control, to lead us down new roads whose contours and vistas provide us with new perspectives. Sometimes, if we are fortunate, those other worlds turn out to have more points of familiarity with our own than we had thought. Sometimes we make connections back to familiar territory and when we have returned, we do so supplied with new perspectives, which enrich our lives as scholars and enhance our role as teachers. Sometimes the experience takes us beyond our immediate lives as scholars and teachers, and the library produces this result particularly when it functions as the storehouse of memory, a treasury whose texts connect us through time to all humanity.

For the last four years I have been the fortunate occupant of Widener 547, a snug and comfortable study on the west side of the fifth stack level of Widener Library. Among its many delights is the fact that it is the study closest to the library's Greek and Latin texts, including the poet Virgil, on whose reception by translators, and others, I have recently been working. Harvard's Virgil collection, like so many of its other collections, is superb, and it has scores of Virgil translations dating from as far back as the middle of our waning millennium. Virgil went untranslated for the first millennium and a half, since Latin remained vibrant through much of that period, but throughout Europe vernacular continuations and adaptations in essence constitute the new national literatures, whether in Italy (Dante, Ariosto, Tasso), England (Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton), or elsewhere. Whatever their novelties, these poets have their basis in the Latin poet, whose centrality has never faded, even in this, our own progressively unschooled and posthistorical century. Translation is a specialized type of reception, whether it be of the Bible, Virgil, or anything else, and it begins to occur only when access to the original begins to become arduous. The beginning of Virgil translation into English occurs in 1513, with publication of the Scottish poet Gavin Douglas's lively and idiosyncratic version. Towards the end of that century, Phaer's edition of 1573 (completed by Twyne) was the next complete version; and in the seventeenth century thirty translations of the *Aeneid* (mostly of selections) culminated in the most famous, that of Dryden in 1697 (2d. ed., 1698). The pace slowed somewhat in the eighteenth century, partly because Dryden's version itself came to be perceived as a classic, but a steady stream has continued to our time, one of the latest being a selection by

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Harvard's own Seamus Heaney ("The Golden Bough," in *Seeing Things* [London 1991]).

Translation is a form of hermeneutics, and it has been my project to examine four and a half centuries of translations from the point of view of their rewriting of the Virgilian model, and their rewriting of each other. For much of this period I have had to use Houghton, Harvard's Rare Books Library, since the earlier translations marginalized by Dryden exist only in the form of the rare book: once Dryden's translation had become classic, those prior versions became frozen artifacts, rather than living representations of the Virgilian model. In contrast, Dryden continues to be edited, and even to create its own commentary tradition. For Dryden and the last two centuries I have been able simply to walk the few steps to Widener's Virgil collection, looking up a line or passage in one or more translations, and returning to work. At such moments the true joy of an open stack library impresses itself, infinitely superior to having to reconstruct the real shelf from the virtual one in HOLLIS or any other on-line catalog, or make use of the real one in Houghton, to which access is—understandably—denied. The best of worlds would be real shelves, with real browsing always a possibility, for there is no substitute, at certain times, for scrutinizing the shelf of a library, particularly one that has collected as Harvard's has.[1]

I turn now to the serendipity that is at the heart of browsing, and to the happy accidents that are associated with it. This second happy accident is one that brought me into another world, close at hand in the micro-geography of Widener, less so in other ways—or so I once thought. Let us, somewhat like Virgil and Dante, change Widener levels, in this case descending, to Harvard's wonderful collection on American history, US 1 to US 42628. My favorite part, located on 4 West and South, almost immediately under the Older Widener Greek and Latin collection and immediately above the LC Greek and Latin class, is the state-by-state collection of local and family histories, biographies, county or city histories of various types, and other records assiduously collected over the last centuries. Anyone who wishes to gain a sense of the comprehensive collecting that Widener, and Harvard, has carried out may easily do so by spending some time in this part of the stack.

Embedded in this priceless layer of the tiara is a special jewel, the Theodore Roosevelt Collection. Serendipitous recreational browsing took me to that collection last year, as it has done frequently before and will continue to do. On that occasion, I happened to take down, pretty much at random, a volume entitled *Papers of John Davis Long*—a genre of which I am fond. The papers were selected and edited by one Gardner Weld Allen, and constitute volume 78 of the *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society* (1939); they had been undisturbed, or at least not checked out, since 1971.[2] From the introduction I discovered that the aforementioned Long, son of Zadoc Long, born 27 October 1838 in Buckfield, Maine, was a Harvard College graduate (1857), who went on to practice law in Boston, at the same time enjoying an active career in public life: a member of the Massachusetts General Court, with terms as Speaker of the House, he also served as Governor in 1880, 1881, and 1882. In the next years, until 1889, he served in the House of Representatives, and ended his public career serving as Secretary of the Navy

[1] The current incapacity of HOLLIS to do any sort of satisfactory virtual browsing (via more effective call number searching) will, we hope, only be a temporary situation.

[2] Fortunately the Roosevelt Collection is immune to the necessities of transferral of volumes to remote storage. Had this volume been removed, this entire avenue of inquiry would presumably have been closed to me.

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Theodore Roosevelt Collection in Widener's 4 West, where the author's browsing led him to John D. Long. Photo credit: Mary Lee.

(4 March 1897 to 1 May 1902) under McKinley, including some months under Roosevelt, who assumed the presidency after McKinley's assassination on 14 September 1901.

Governor Long (as he was generally known, even throughout his subsequent career) has excited interest—if that be the right verb—chiefly because in 1898, during this last public office and following the sinking of the *Maine* in Havana harbor, his life was made somewhat difficult by his impetuous Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt, the eponymous hero of the fourth floor stack himself. Although Roosevelt, justly enough, comes to mind as a writer on naval matters, Long himself was no stranger to the American navy, on which he later produced an informed and thorough study, *The New American Navy* (New York, 1903)—also to be found in the Roosevelt Collection. Harvard's Library played an early role in this interest; indeed, it may have planted and germinated the seed that would produce one of the leaders of the modern American navy. While a fourteen-year-old Harvard freshman, the future Secretary of the Navy notes, on 7 October 1853 (*Journal* 25):[3] "I have much time to read and write, and since I have so good opportunity of getting useful books from the College Library, I improve my time. I am now reading Cooper's *Naval History* which I find very interesting." Long would have found the book, James Fenimore Cooper's *History of the American Navy,* published that year, by G. Putnam and Sons, in Gore Hall, where the College Library was housed before the building of Widener. It is now in the stacks of

3 "*Journal*" = *Journal of John D. Long*, ed. Margaret Long (Rindge, N.H., 1956).

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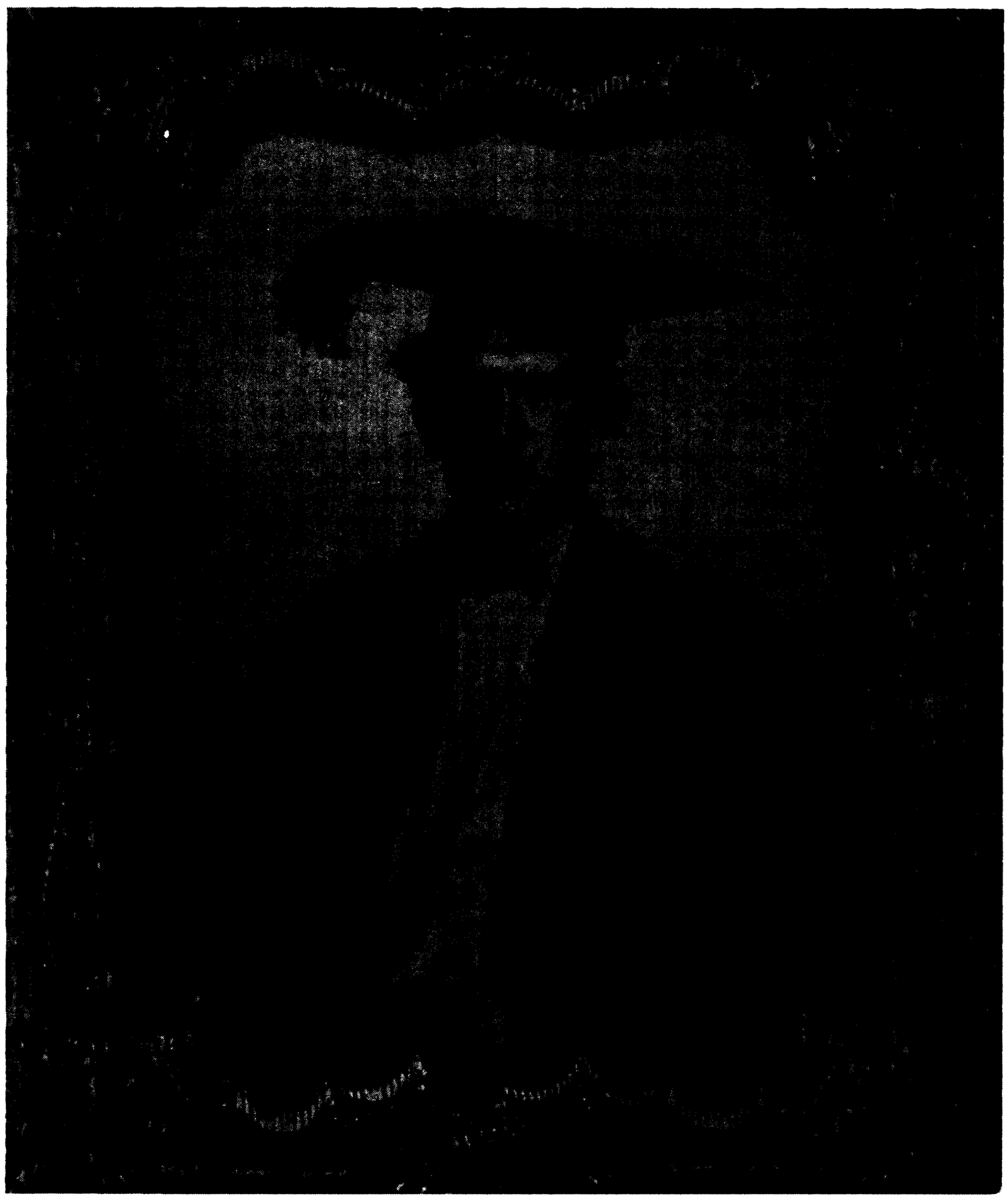

John Davis Long as a senior in Harvard College, 1857. On Friday, 19 June, as an 18-year-old, he delivered his Commencement Ode. The opening shows his reflective sense of memory was formed at an early age:

How bright were the hopes that incited the throng
When wandering in search of the truth,
We came to the fountain, whose waters so long
Have nourished the bloom of our youth:
How sad we are now, that this time-hallowed spot
Shall echo our voices no more;
Behind us, the past with sweet memories fraught;
The future, uncertain, before.

4S, at US 2092.15.5. Two days after this entry, on Sunday, 9 October, Long takes a break from his reading: "I went over to the Charlestown Navy Yard yesterday and saw some big men of war, one over 100 guns." The next entry has him turning fifteen and reading Virgil's *Aeneid,* to which we return anon.

My interest in John Davis Long might have ended with my initial and casual perusal of the 377 letters of the *Papers*—of which only twenty-four are by Long, the rest addressed to him, from naval personalities for the most part, and many are quite tedious. But one, on pages 348–49, caught my attention. It was from Henry S. Pritchett, the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a letter of 7 January 1901, thanking Secretary Long for an address he had given at MIT, and proceeding to discuss the future publication of the speech in *Technology Review.* Long and Pritchett had clearly had other scientific discussions, but not just scientific, as emerged from the second half of Pritchett's letter:

> I thank you for reminding me it was the *Aeneid* and not the *Iliad* that you translated. This was a careless slip of the tongue on my part, as I have known the book almost from its publication, which occurred soon after I left college, although I did not know until a few months ago that the Mr. Long who translated the *Aeneid* was

> the former governor and present secretary of the navy. You of course did not know that during my college life I devoted myself principally to the classics, and went into a scientific education later. At one time I was much interested in all translations of the better known classics, having attempted a metrical translation of the *Oepidus Tyrranus* [*sic*] myself, which however, fortunately never saw the light.

My first reaction was a classicist's natural satisfaction (immediately tempered by a classicist's sense of the constancy of decline) in observing the president of MIT and the Secretary of the Navy discussing their translations of Sophocles and Virgil; but I also shared Pritchett's enlightenment, for I too had failed to connect the translator (whose work I knew and had been using) with the Secretary and Governor (with whom I was only just becoming acquainted). A quick HOLLIS search confirmed the identity and sent me back to the 4th level, this time outside the Roosevelt Collection to US 13608.35 (in the Massachusetts section), specifically to the two other works of hagiography on Governor Long to which I have been referring: the first, *America of Yesterday,* was a selection from the twenty-four volumes of Long's journal (which reside in the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston), edited by Lawrence Shaw Mayo (Boston, 1923); the second was the editorial work of Long's daughter Margaret Long, *The Journal of John D. Long* (Rindge, N. H., 1956). Again the genres were those that I have come to admire, though now I looked to them with an interest that was more than simply recreational—for I was now dealing with a fellow Virgilian, one, moreover, who was emerging as a most likeable person.

Twenty years before the sinking of the *Maine,* Long, having just been elected Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives for the third time, notes in his journal (17 January, 1878) "A quiet day. Buy Bryant's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Read a book in the former." Five days later, presumably as a result of this activity, he records (22 January) "Begin this evening a translation of Virgil. Perhaps I shall finish it and publish." For the next year, we find steady references to his task, which enters into the rhythms of his family life, his activities in his law practice, and the workings of the state legislature. It is memory of Virgil and his boyhood love of Virgil and Latin poetry that brought Long back to the poet. One of his earliest entries in the journal comes from Monday, 24 July 1848; the nine-year-old boy writes excitedly:

> A cloudy, rainy, misty, and muddy day. Our school keeps two or three weeks longer. *I have begun the study of Latin* [Long's emphasis]. Zadoc [his brother] will hear me recite.

And in the preface to the *Aeneid* he harks back to those days:

> Perhaps some will read this. If so, they will renew, as I after twenty-five years have done, not only the kindly acquaintance of this Roman story-teller, but the happy morning of the school-boy's shining face and eager heart.

Libraries ensure that memory survives. Widener Library, and its tangible, browsable, stacks, is a storehouse of memory, much like the Greek Mouseion of Alexandria, a home and support to scholars, who were also attendants of the Muses, those daughters of Memory. Like us, they were concerned with the Humanities, with preserving the memory of the best that has been thought and written. Everywhere we look we see the dangers posed by oblivion: oblivion of history, oblivion of humanity, and oblivion of the humanities. Conversely, memory is what con-

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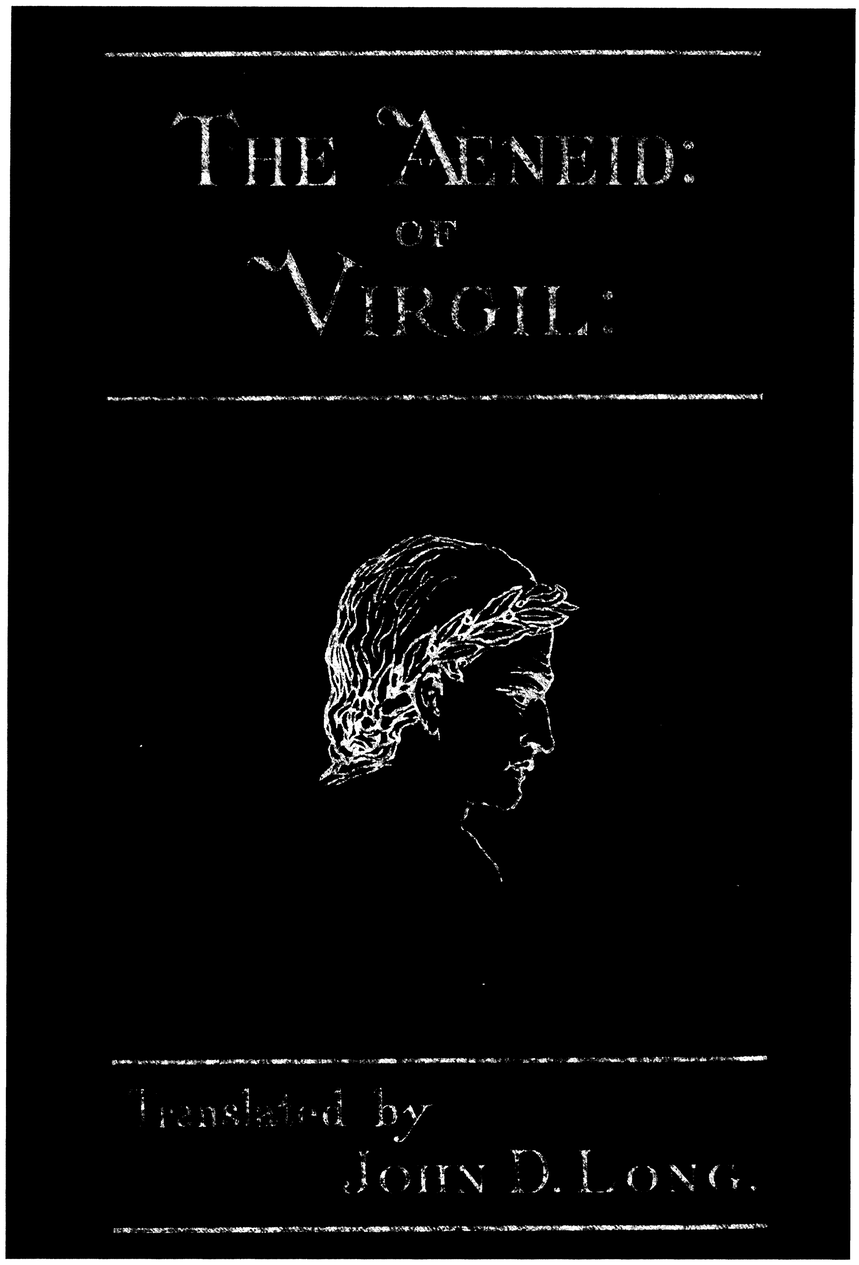

Front cover of Long's Aeneid. *His journal entry for Wednesday 11 June 1897 reads: "My Virgil issued today. Give a copy each to Mary, Margaret, Helen"—to whom the work is dedicated:*

TO
MY WIFE AND MY TWO LITTLE GIRLS
SO OFTEN THE COMPANIONS
OF MY WORK
I DEDICATE IT

nects us to what matters for our lives as scholars, teachers, and members of human communities. By browsing in the stacks of Widener, we met Virgil and his translators, and we met John Davis Long, translator of Virgil and Secretary of the Navy, and we saw him taking from the Harvard College Library the books that would help create his own life, as a poet, politician, father and husband, in short as an admirable human being.

Long died of congestive heart disease in the house that he loved, in Hingham, Mass., on 28 August 1915, some two months after the Harry Elkins Widener Memorial Library opened. As President of the Harvard Board of Overseers from 1902 to 1914, John Long, who himself lost a nephew on the *Titanic,* would have received reports of the Library Visiting Committee (whose members included J. P. Morgan), and would have been at the meeting of the Governing Boards in November 1912, which approved plans for the building of Widener on the site of the previous library, Gore Hall. Six years earlier, on 26 September 1906, the beginning of Harry Elkins Widener's senior year at Harvard, Long had come to Cambridge, to attend a meeting of the Overseers, but also to deliver his son who was beginning his freshman year (*Journal* 302):

> I took him into the college yard at the same entrance at which I went on a similar errand 53 years ago, in 1853. How well I remember that morning: Father walked with me up the avenue to the steps of the library, Gore Hall. On them we sat & there parted, I, going to my lessons, he, returning home. I was a little boy, only fourteen years old, a child, homesick. I remember that I cried, & though he did not cry I doubt not his heart broke more than mine.

There is, in Harvard's Massachusetts Hall, not far from Room 22, John Long's room in his senior year, a commemorative plaque, dedicated on his birthday, 27 October, in 1947, by his chidren, Margaret and Peirce. Long's journal entry from 28 September, 1856 (the beginning of his senior year) may have decided the location: "I begin to think that I love my room better than any other place in the vicinity." I hope this article will serve as another Harvard memorial for Long, whom I was fortunate to meet first through a chance encounter in Harvard's Elysium, the stacks of her Widener Library, where he now resides, among the collection of his old Assistant Secretary and a close neighbor to the poet who so touched him, and like them accessible to all of us who care to enter this storehouse of memory of which we are all both guardians and beneficiaries.[4]

[4] A fuller version of this paper will be published in a future issue of the *HLB*.

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